

Ugly

“What Would You Have Done?”

By Cdr. Stu Alexander, OinC AIMD, NAS Jacksonville

We were 100-percent ORM complete and 100-percent drive-safe complete. All divisions got monthly safety training. In July, before I arrived, the command had completed a safety stand-down, covering traffic safety and including DUI lectures from the local sheriff's office and state highway patrol. Not only was the command focused on off-duty-mishap training, they also just had been complimented on a superlative NAVOSH safety inspection. The command seemed to be doing everything possible to spread the word. Nevertheless, a shipmate died. What more could my command have done?

Columbus Day weekend meant a well-deserved three days off for the command. It was fall in Florida, and the forecast was great. Everyone was excited to have the extra day to spend with family and friends. I had been on board less than two weeks but had made it clear in that short period that safety was at the top of my list. Through Captain's Call, a lengthy meeting with the CPO mess, and division meetings, I had put out the word that my primary concern was the safety of our Sailors—both on and off duty. I didn't know I would get my biggest leadership challenge 11 days after reporting and wouldn't catch my breath again until I had briefed the death of a shipmate to 800 of my shipmates, my commodore, and (via VTC) a two-star. Here's what happened:

Around 1600, Oct. 10, 2004, after working duty-section weekend, a 33-year-old male Sailor was at home partying with friends. The get-together lasted until 1900, when the Sailor said he wanted to go to a club. Knowing that he had been drinking, his girlfriend had taken his car keys. This gesture angered the Sailor and led to a heated argument that escalated to the point where the Sailor's roommate checked to see what the commotion was all about. The Sailor and his girlfriend subsequently cooled off, and the roommate said he would drive the Sailor to the club if he just would

give him the thumbs-up when he was ready to go. The Sailor agreed, and the roommate returned to his room.

Unfortunately, the upset Sailor also owned a motorcycle, and, as fate would have it, he still had the keys in his pocket. About 2100, he decided to leave the house without telling anyone. He quietly pushed his motorcycle out of his garage and into the street, closed the garage door, and slipped away unnoticed. Three hours later, he was dead. His whereabouts for those three hours is unknown.

The police accident report says that, at approximately 2345, the Sailor was traveling north at a high rate of speed, apparently on the way home, when he failed to negotiate a turn. He left the northbound lane and hit the southbound curb. The motorcycle then struck a guardrail, ejecting the Sailor. A witness reported he saw the motorcycle lying on the sidewalk and stopped to investigate. He found the Sailor lying nearby in the grass and called emergency-rescue personnel. They pronounced the Sailor dead at the scene.

My command learned many valuable lessons in the days and weeks that followed this incident, and many Sailors are walking around saying, “If only I had...” For now, I'd like everyone to look at his/her own command and challenge your leaders to take an intrusive-leadership approach to knowing what your Sailors are doing off duty. Use this example at your next divisional quarters to ask, “What would you have done?” Listen closely to the responses you get. 🦋

